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Lecture No. (25)
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English (Hons.)
Paper I (History of English Literature)
Topic: Elizabethan Poetry

Shakespeare, without an iota of ~~let~~ doubt, was the towering figure of literature of the age known as it is by his name. We can, however divide it for the sake of convenience into two periods, ① Elizabethan and ② Jacobean.

Elizabethan Period:

The bifurcation of the Age of Shakespeare into two is nothing but a device to assist the chronology of history. There are several names of poets and authors who wrote with equal felicity in the reign of Queen Elizabeth as well as in that of James I. We may take the names of Shakespeare, Daniel, Drayton and Chapman for example. But a poetic evolution is clearly perceivable which serves as the dividing factor between the first two decades of the seventeenth century and the closing years of the sixteenth century which is known as the Elizabethan era.

Like other spheres of life in England of the Elizabethan age, the literary field was also agog with the spirit of Renaissance and Reformation; poetry being no exception to it. It was this era in which Renaissance

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infused in the poetry its highest and most spontaneous expression. The poetry of this era is suffused with the spirit of conquest and self glorification, humanism and ^{vigorous} ~~vigorous~~ imagination, emotional depth and aerial graces. Be it the theatrical poetry of dramatist-poets like Marlowe and Shakespeare, or the poets outside theatre like Lyly, ~~Sir~~ Sidney and Spenser, the passion for poetry was absorbing and the outcome of it was equal to expectations. The poetry and drama both can be termed as great having original beauty.

A clear change of attitude becomes visible as the period depicts typical British character and temperament, having absorbed the early Italian and classical influences completely. In the words of Edward Albert: "The native English genius, having absorbed the lessons of foreign writers, add to them the youth and ardour of its own spirit. The result is fullness, freshness and grandeur of style unequalled in any other period of our literature. There are lyrics and allegories of Spenser; the poems, dramas and lyrics of

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Shakespeare; and the innumerable miscellanies, poems and plays of other writers. The style is as varied as the poems, but the universal note is ~~that~~ the romantic one of power and wonder."

Other characteristics of the poetry of the Elizabethan age can be innumeralated as follows:-

Wide variety:-

varied poetical forms are visible in the poetic output of the period as much as it is with lyric, elegy, eclogue, ode, sonnet, madrigal etc. of different poets. Not only in form but in content as well the poems present a wide spectrum. If, on the one hand, we come across patriotic poems such as Warr-er's "Abbie's England", Daniel's "Civil Wars of York and Lancaster", Drayton's "The Baron's War" and the "Ballad of Agincourt" etc.; the Love poems characterized by romance and youthful vigour are also there to see; the examples being such poems as Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella", Spenser's "Amoretti", Daniel's "Delia", Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" and Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis". Again, if ~~warrior's~~ one searches for the spiritual moorings, the tragedies of Shakespeare and Marlowe as well as Brooke's poems such as "On Human Learning", "On Wars" and "On Religion" come for reckoning. The

④ readers who enjoy satire and humour are also not going to be disappointed by the prolific poets of this age ~~as~~ as we see, towards the end of the period, poets like Donne and Drummond come up with such poems as "Satires" and "Sonnets" respectively.

Independent Spirit What is clearly discernable in all of these poems is the spirit of independence. The all pervasive spirit of freedom made the poets rebel against any set rules of poetic composition, of grammar or of prosody. This attitude resulted in the development of new poetic devices and new linguistic mode of expression with better artistic results. Some new stanza forms were also introduced with effective craftsmanship.

Thus the Elizabethan poetry was truly reflective of the age and its spirit — the "age in which", says W. H. Hudson, "men lived intensely, thought intensely, and wrote intensely". At such a time, when passions were strong, and speculation was rife, everything conspired to bring out of each man the best that was in him, and whatever might be the individual quality of his work, the fulness and many-sidedness of the life about him were certain to be reflected in it."

(concluded.)

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